

March 7, 2013

Dear Members of the Public Health Commission:

I am writing to submit testimony about SB 374. I am the parent of two girls who attend the Newtown Public Schools, one in high school, the other in middle school. I am also a public school special educator.

“To provide behavioral health assessments to children.” I see SB 374 as a weak start to help students who are experiencing mental issues. This is an over-simplification of needed interactions with students to help them develop into secure adults, mentally. I understand all too clearly how mental health issues can impact students, teachers, and schools. I do not understand how a health assessment will help me to assist students experiencing difficulties. An appropriate bill should include more details on the assessment, what will be done with it, and the needed interventions/funding to support a plan of assistance. Schools need a plan and the supports in place NOW to help children feel good about themselves. And when they don't, schools need to be equipped to work with those children and their families to provide the best support system possible.

We are currently lacking those resources. As a special educator, I have experienced situations where children were exhibiting mental health difficulties. I have had students have outbursts which have made me fearful of my safety and the other students in my charge. We have had to utilize 211 and even 911 to send a student for a psychiatric evaluation at the hospital. I have had my classroom trashed, sent other students to safety, and employed non-threatening stances in order to maintain a safe environment. Many of these children had already had a health assessment and behavior plans in place. What about the students who haven't? Who are just stewing or feeling awful inside? While assessing them appears to be the answer to my question, this bill falls way short in truly helping those students. Identification is just a start. We need to change the way schools identify students, interact with students, and plan programs to meet their needs in the area of mental health. SB 374 fails to provide such a plan.

The time is NOW to develop a comprehensive plan to address mental health issue in our schools, our communities. Please rewrite it to include a comprehensive plan to meet these needs. Look at ways to provide the needed resources to enact the programs that will truly help these children.

Sincerely,

Allison Elkow
Newtown, CT